L. Mendel Rivers

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Lucius Mendel Rivers (September 28, 1905 – December 28, 1970) was a Democratic U.S. Representative from South Carolina, representing the Charleston-based 1st congressional district for nearly 30 years. He was chairman of the House Armed Services Committee as the U.S. escalated its involvement in the Vietnam War.

Contents [hide]

1 Early life and education
2 Entry into politics
2.1 1940 election
3 Congressional career
3.1 Domestic legislation
3.2 Views regarding race
3.3 Vietnam War, and the My Lai Massacre cover-up
3.4 House Armed Services Chairman
4 Personal life
5 Honors
6 See also
7 Notes
8 References
9 External links

L. Mendel Rivers

Member of the U.S. House of Representatives from South Carolina's 1st district

In office
January 3, 1941 – December 28, 1970

Preceded by	Clara G. McMillan
Succeeded by	Mendel Jackson Davis

Member of the South Carolina House of Representatives from Charleston County

In office
January 9, 1934 – June 6, 1936

Personal details

Born	September 28, 1905 Gumville, South Carolina
Died	December 28, 1970 (aged 65) Birmingham, Alabama
Political party	Democratic
Spouse(s)	Margaret Middleton Rivers (1938–1970)
Children	3, including L. Mendel Rivers, Jr.

Early life and education [edit source]

Mendel Rivers was born in Gumville, South Carolina, to Lucius Hampton Rivers and Henrietta Marion McCay. The family moved to St. Stephen in 1907 and lived comfortably until 1915, when Lucius died from pneumonia. Mendel's older brother Earle was put in charge of running the farm, but was not interested in agriculture and as a result the family's assets declined. Eventually, they were compelled to move to North Charleston where they opened up a boarding house on O'Hear Avenue.

Rivers went to the local schools and it took him six years to graduate from Charleston High School in 1926. He then attended the College of Charleston for three years and the University of South Carolina School of Law for two years, graduating from neither. The College of the University of South Carolina advised Rivers to take up another profession because although he knew the assignments, he suffered from stage fright. Rivers was determined to become a lawyer so he returned to College of Charleston, took classes to prepare himself for the bar examination, and passed in 1932. Unable to find employment in Charleston law firms, he started his own practice.

Entry into politics [edit source]

Rivers first became involved in politics in 1930 when he participated in Ed Pritchard's unsuccessful campaign for the state legislature against Russell McGowan. He was an active member of the Charleston County Democrats club and shortly after passing the bar, Rivers decided to run for one of the twelve state representative seats from Charleston County. County politics in the 1930s were controlled by the political machine of Charleston mayor Burnet R. Maybank, and gaining his endorsement was crucial to winning an election. Rivers sought the mayor's blessing, but was rejected because he was an unknown candidate from North Charleston. He ran as an Independent Democrat and was defeated in his bid for election.

A vacancy on the Charleston County delegation arose in 1933 when Ben Scott Whaley resigned to join the staff of Senator James Francis Byrnes. Rivers won the special election by running against Charleston and campaigning on the slogan "Give the Northern End of the County a Representative."[11] In 1934, Rivers ran for re-election and received the most votes of any candidate in the county's history.[12] Rivers' platform, making him chairman of the county delegation. As a state Representative, Rivers served on the Judiciary and Education committees. He became the state president of the Young Democrats in 1935 and was a delegate to the 1936 Democratic National Convention.

The rapid ascendancy of Rivers attracted the attention of 1st district Congressman Thomas S. McMillan who became worried when Rivers requested papers from the state Democratic secretary in 1936 to run for office. McMillan arranged a meeting with Rivers and offered him a position as Special Assistant to the Attorney General of the United States. Rivers accepted and worked throughout the South collecting unpaid criminal fines and forfeited bail bonds.

1940 election [edit source]

On September 29, 1939, McMillan died and Rivers immediately made plans to run for Congress. He quit his federal job in February 1940 and opened a law practice in Charleston to provide a base for his campaign. His opponent in the Democratic primary was Alfred von Kolnitz, who had the backing of the Charleston political establishment and Thomas McMillan's widow, Clara. Rivers knew that he was not going to win the vote in Charleston, so he tried to maximize his vote outside of Charleston by making the theme of his campaign about the chicanery of the city. Furthermore, with World War II raging in Europe, Rivers played up von Kolnitz's German name to make it appear as if a Nazi sympathizer. On August 27, Rivers won the Democratic primary election by running up a huge margin in the counties outside of Charleston, which offset his loss in Charleston County. In those days, victory in the Democratic primary was tantamount to election in South Carolina, and Rivers took office on January 3, 1941.

Congressional career [edit source]

Domestic legislation [edit source]

Once in Congress, Rivers sought a seat on the Agriculture committee, but it was full and he was instead placed on the Merchant Marine and Fisheries committee. In March, he was appointed to the Naval Affairs committee which was later combined with the Military Affairs committee to form the House Armed Services Committee. His first legislative success was in 1942 when he authored a bill to build an oil pipeline from Mississippi to the Southeast coast to reduce the transportation costs of the product. The bill was passed by Congress and signed by President Roosevelt, but Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes refused to construct the pipeline because of the opposition by Big Oil.[7]

Rivers's first major success was the repeal of the federal tax on colored oleomargarine. The tax was first implemented because margarine was a much cheaper substitute of butter which threatened the interests of the dairy farmers. When Rivers first introduced the bill in 1944 to repeal the tax, it was vigorously opposed by Midwestern Representatives and the bill died in the agriculture committee. Undeterred, Rivers reintroduced the bill every year and made so many speeches in favor of the repeal of the tax that he was nicknamed "Oleo" Rivers.[8] In 1949, he circulated a petition in the House to force the bill out of the agriculture committee and to the full House for a vote. The bill passed the House and then the Senate and was signed into law by President Truman in 1950. The manufacturers of margarine were forever grateful to Rivers and sent him complimentary boxes of oleo until the day he died.[9]

Views regarding race [edit source]

Like most South Carolinian Democrats from his era, Rivers was an ardent segregationist. He voted against every civil rights bill, and joined the entire South Carolina delegation in signing the Southern Manifesto in 1956. He attempted to have Charleston federal judge Wallies Waring impeached for having ruled that blacks had to be allowed to vote in the Democratic primary and that segregated schools were unconstitutional. When President Truman integrated the U.S. Army in 1948, Rivers called him a "dead issue" and a "bankrupt politician".[10] Rivers was a non-interventionist and supported Strom Thurmond in the 1948 Presidential election. After Truman's victory, he lost his committee privileges and was lucky to retain his seat on the Armed Services Committee.

Rivers attended the 1952 Democratic National Convention and believed that Adlai Stevenson would reverse the policies of Truman by returning to traditional Democratic principles. However, Rivers became disillusioned with Stevenson and he openly supported Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower in the 1952 Presidential election because he said that he would be sensitive to Southern concerns.[REF] Rivers's long-held distrust of Republicans was reinforced shortly after Eisenhower became president when he ordered the desegregation of all schools on military bases and did not grant Rivers patronage privileges, despite Rivers being the only Democrat to support Eisenhower in 1952.[8] Eisenhower's continual push for integration infuriated Rivers. When asked if he would back Eisenhower again in 1956, Rivers later claimed to have responded "Hell no! Ain't no education in the second kick of a mule."[CT]

In the 1960s, Rivers softened his vocal opposition to civil rights legislation. He had risen in the ranks and been power in the House depended upon the continual support of national Democrats. Rivers defended his approach from defending segregation to the maintenance of law and order. He found a kindred spirit in George Wallace and he attended one of Wallace's fundraising dinners in 1968. Wallace asked Rivers in July to be his running mate for the 1968 Presidential election, but Rivers dared not risk losing his chairmanship of the House Armed Services Committee and declined the offer.[9]

Vietnam War, and the My Lai Massacre cover-up [edit source]

Rivers was initially skeptical of America's escalation of the Vietnam War and the sending of combat troops to Vietnam, but once the war was commenced, he became one of the strongest supporters of the war. He enjoyed referring to himself as "The Granddaddy of the War Hawks."[10] He urged the President to use nuclear weapons against the North Vietnamese and to invade and occupy Hanoi.[11]

During an investigation of the My Lai Massacre, Rivers criticized Army helicopter pilot CW2 (later Major) Hugh Thompson, Jr. for giving the order to his men to fire upon American soldiers at My Lai if they continued to shoot unarmed Vietnamese civilians, calling him a traitor and saying he should be prosecuted.[12] Rivers was unable to believe that American soldiers would do such a thing and publicly expressed doubt that any massacre ever happened. He attempted to protect the later-convicted perpetrator of My Lai, Army 2nd Lt. William Calley, by quickly holding hearings of his subcommittee on My Lai, calling every major witness to the event (including Thompson) before the subcommittee, and then refusing to release the transcripts of the testimony, so that military prosecutors would be prohibited from calling those persons as witnesses at Calley's court martial.[13]

House Armed Services Chairman [edit source]

Rivers became the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee in 1965 following the retirement of Carl Vinson. Upon moving into the Rayburn House Office Building, Rivers placed a plaque of Article 1, Section 8 of the United States Constitution that specified the role of the legislature in civilian supervision of the military. He felt that the Congress should not delegate its powers to the President nor the Secretary of Defense and that a vigorous Congress would make the President perform his job better.[14] As Rivers inspected the committee room, he became incensed when he discovered cloakrooms adjoining the chamber for the Democratic and Republican Party members to discuss strategy. Rivers viewed national defense as a non-partisan issue and had the cloakrooms turned into offices.[14]

L. Mendel Rivers at the White House, March 7, 1968

By the time Rivers became the chairman, he was well known for being a strong supporter of the American military in general, and of enlisted military personnel in particular. In 1963 he established, through the vehicle of the House-Senate Conference Committee, the principle of linking military retired pay to increases in the Consumer Price Index, similar to the practice for retired federal civil servants. In 1964 he championed the cause of "hospital rights," guaranteeing medical care in military hospitals for military retirees and their dependents. After becoming chairman, he helped secure the first military pay raise since 1952 in 1965 despite opposition from the Secretary of Defense McNamara and President Johnson. Rivers was instrumental in establishing the additional enlisted pay grade of E-9, and he helped secure mobile home allowances and cheap air fares for soldiers returning from Vietnam.[15]

Rivers strongly supported the constant upgrading of US military preparedness, regardless of the cost. He supported making all US Navy ships nuclear powered,[16] and he championed development of the US Air Force's C-5A Galaxy military airlift jet, despite huge cost overruns.[17] In his last speech to his colleagues in the US House of Representatives on December 7, 1970, delivered just before he departed for Birmingham, Alabama to have heart surgery, he stated, "While we debate the question of maintaining our military capability, the Soviet Union forges ahead. We seem hell-bent on national suicide…We cannot as a nation afford to spend one penny less on national defense than that amount which is required to insure that you and I, and our children, can convince the Soviets they dare not pull the trigger when a Soviet gun is placed against our heads."[18] In that same speech, he delivered the quote for which he is best remembered: "The final measure of our ability to survive as a nation in a hostile world will not be how well we have managed our domestic resources and domestic programs, but whether or not we have avoided and frustrated the forces of evil which would draw us into the crucible of war with the Soviet Union. If we fail in that endeavor, we will have failed in everything."

Rivers died of heart failure in Birmingham, Alabama on December 28, 1970, 17 days after undergoing surgery to replace a leaking mitral valve at the University of Alabama Hospital.[19] Almost two months earlier, he had been elected to a 16th term in Congress. He was buried at St. Stephen Episcopal Church Cemetery in St. Stephen, South Carolina.

Personal life [edit source]

Rivers married Margaret Middleton (called Marguerite by Mendel, but Marwee by family and friends) on September 1, 1938. They had first met in 1930 at Camp Kanuga, near Hendersonville, North Carolina, where Mendel impressed Marwee by being elected Best Boy Camper, despite being 24 and a law school student.[20] The couple had three children: Peggy in 1939, Marion in 1943, and Mendel Jr. in 1947.

Rivers was an Episcopalian, and a member of the Freemasons (Landmark Lodge No. 76, A.F.M.), the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, and the Exchange Club. He was an enthusiast of boxing and was friends with both Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney.[21] He enjoyed playing baseball and he batted well over .300 in the Congressional Baseball Games.

According to journalists, alcoholism plagued Rivers for much of his life.[22] He was said to be the "singer" variety of alcoholic, one who is generally sober but relapses periodically. Washington syndicated columnist Drew Pearson called him a "security risk" and devoted eight pages to him in his 1968 book *The Case Against Congress*.[23]

Honors [edit source]

Rivers received numerous accolades and honors to commemorate his service to the nation and to the 1st congressional district. In 1948, a stretch of highway from the crossing of U.S. Route 78 over Meeting Street (known as the Five-Mile Viaduct) to where U.S. Route 52 meets the Berkeley County line was named as Rivers Avenue because Rivers was key in getting funds from Congress to pave it as the first four-lane road in North Charleston.[24][25] The town of St. Stephen held a day-long celebration for Rivers in 1964 and named the secondary road that ran from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church to the house he grew up in as Mendel Rivers Road.[26]

A seven-story office building located across Meeting Street from Marion Square was named the L. Mendel Rivers Federal Building in 1964.[26] The building was vacated in 1999 following damage by Hurricane Floyd and it was purchased in January 2008 by a private developer (and it later became a hotel, The Dewberry). The L. Mendel Rivers Elementary School in Altus, Oklahoma was named for Rivers because he prevented the Altus Air Force Base from closing by making it the location of the training school for the C-5 Galaxy.[27][28][29] Charleston Southern University honored Rivers continual support of the institution by naming its college library as the L. Mendel Rivers Library in October 1970.[REF11]

Rivers was admired by some soldiers who repaid his zealous support for them with adulation. They felt he was their congressman and referred to him as the "serviceman's best friend."[CT] A road in Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam was called the Mendel Rivers Parkway[26] and the soldiers gave Rivers a captured Viet Cong carbine that he prominently displayed in his office. For obtaining drastically reduced air fares for soldiers on furlough, they gave him a cap with six stars and "The Big Boss" inscribed on it, indicating that Rivers outranked all military officials.[30]

After his death, the Navy honored his dedication by naming the submarine USS *L. Mendel Rivers* (SSN-686) in his honor in 1971.[34][35] His friends raised money create a small park and have a bust placed adjacent to the O.T. Wallace County Office Building in downtown Charleston.[36] Rivers was named as one of the "Magnificent Ten Charlestonians Who Shaped the 20th Century" by Charleston Magazine in December 1999 for his efforts to expand the military in his district.[37]

See also [edit source]

- NASCAR National Commissioner
- List of United States Congress members who died in office (1950–99)

Notes [edit source]

1. ^ Ravenel p. 17
2. ^ Ravenel, p. 67
3. ^ Rivers, p. 78
4. ^ Rivers, p. 79
5. ^ Rivers, p. 90
6. ^ Ravenel, p. 99
7. ^ Rivers, p. 92
8. ^ Ravenel, p. 98
9. ^ Rivers, p. 96
10. ^ Rivers, p. 164
11. ^ Rivers, p. 138
12. ^ Colburn, Lawrence (January 18, 2006). "Hugh Thompson's Crewmember Remembers Helping to Stop the My Lai Massacre"
13. ^ Davidson, Michael J. (April 18, 2006). "Congressional Investigations and Their Effect on Subsequent Military Prosecutions" (PDF). *The Journal of Law and Policy*: 300–303. Archived from the original (PDF) on 2009-05-30.
14. ^ *a b* Rivers, p. 132
15. ^ Rivers, p. 163
16. ^ Rivers, pp. 137, 162
17. ^ Rivers, p. 161
18. ^ Rivers, p. 193
19. ^ "L. Mendel Rivers dies in Alabama" *St. Petersburg Times*. December 29, 1970.
20. ^ Ravenel, p. 20
21. ^ Ravenel, p. 180
22. ^ Waldman, Steven (1988). "Governing under the influence: Washington alcoholics: their aides protect them, the media shields them" *Washington Monthly*. Archived from the original on 2015-10-18.
23. ^ Rivers, p. 174
24. ^ *a b* Rivers, p. 85
25. ^ Ravenel, p. 123
26. ^ Ravenel, p. 125
27. ^ L. Mendel Rivers Elementary School Website Archived 2008-02-11 at the Wayback Machine
28. ^ *a b* Rivers, p. 165
29. ^ Ravenel, p. 118
30. ^ CSU Library Homepage L. Mendel Rivers Library Webpage
31. ^ Ravenel, p. 128
32. ^ Rivers, pp. 159, 165
33. ^ Rivers, p. 205
34. ^ Rivers, pp. 203-205
35. ^ Ravenel, pp. 163-164
36. ^ Ravenel, p. 129
37. ^ Rivers, p. 207

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- Ravenel, Marion Rivers (1995). *Rivers Delivers*. Wyrick & Company. ISBN 0-941711-24-2.
- Rivers, Margaret Middleton; Margaret M.R. Eastman; L. Mendel Rivers Jr (2007). *Mendel & Me: Life With Congressman L. Mendel Rivers*. The History Press. ISBN 978-1-59629-288-8.

External links [edit source]

- United States Congress. "L. Mendel Rivers (id: R000280)" *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*.
- L. Mendel Rivers at Find a Grave
- The Citadel Archives: L. Rivers Mendel Collection

U.S. House of Representatives		
Preceded by **Clara G. McMillan**	**Member of the U.S. House of Representatives from South Carolina's 1st congressional district** 1941–1970	Succeeded by **Mendel Jackson Davis**
Political offices		
Preceded by **Carl Vinson** **Georgia**	**Chairman of House Armed Services Committee** 1965–1970	Succeeded by **Philip J. Philbin** **Massachusetts**

v · t · e **Chairmen of the United States House Committee on Armed Services** [show]

v · t · e **South Carolina's delegation(s) to the 77th–91st United States Congresses (ordered by seniority)** [show]

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